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SUBJECT: CANADA TO SUSPEND PARLIAMENT, AGAIN

REF: 08 OTTAWA 1516; OTTAWA 944; OTTAWA 954

11. (SBU) Summary. Canada's Parliament will be suspended until March 2010, reminiscent of a similar but shorter suspension one year ago. The Conservatives' argument is that the government will have additional time to concentrate on the "next phase" of its economic recovery plan. There will be no Parliamentary committee meetings, notably those focused on the treatment of Afghan detainees. All pending legislation (apart from a few private members' bills) dies and must be re-introduced. The move will ensure that the government has clear political sailing through the 2010 Winter Olympics. End Summary.

12. (U) As had been rumored only very recently. Prime Minister Stephen Harper on December 30 asked Governor General Michaëlle Jean to "prorogue" (suspend) Parliament until March, rather than having the House of Commons return on January 25 according to its original schedule. (The Senate was due to return on January 26.) The Governor General is expected to accede to the Prime Minister's request. The House of Commons will return in a new session on March 3 to hear another "Speech from the Throne," in which the Governor General will lay out the government's new agenda. The government then plans to introduce the 2010 budget on March 4. Votes to approve the Throne Speech as well as the budget are, by definition, votes of confidence - if the Conservatives lose either vote, there would then be a new election.

13. (SBU) In rather different circumstances (in which the ruling Conservatives were on the verge of losing a vote of confidence), PM Harper had in December 2008 successfully sought a similar prorogation (ref a), as he had also done in September 2007. In September 2008, PM Harper had convinced the Governor General to call a new federal election, calling Parliament "dysfunctional."

14. (U) According to the Prime Minister's spokesman Dmitri Soudas, the purpose of this prorogation is to give the government time to move to the "next phase" of its economic recovery plan and to prepare the new budget. He described the move as "routine" and pointedly insisted that the House of Commons technically only will lose 22 sitting days. He highlighted that the government intended fully to implement its economic action plan and to create a "roadmap to balance budgets" again. He also noted that, due to Senate mandatory retirements (at age 75), the Prime Minister will early in 2010 be able to appoint five new Senators, leaving the Conservatives for the first time ever with a plurality in the Senate, which the Liberals have always dominated. (The Conservatives will not have an actual majority until at least 2011.) Soudas commented that "Michael Ignatieff's Liberal-dominated Senate has very often blocked, opposed, and gutted" key legislation, notably on product safety and additional anti-crime measures. He added that the Conservatives would also turn in the next Parliamentary session to long-desired Senate reform measures, including fixed terms and elections. (Senators

are currently appointed by the Governor General, upon the advice of the Prime Minister.)

15. (U) Opposition Members of Parliament quickly howled in protest, with Liberal house leader Ralph Goodale calling the move "beyond arrogant, almost despotic" and a "shocking insult to democracy." (Liberal leader Ignatieff has yet to make a public comment.) New Democratic Party house leader Libby Davies called prorogation a "political scam." There has been widespread speculation in the media and among MPs that the Conservatives' key goal was to block additional committee hearings on allegations of the abuse of Afghan prisoners whom the Canadian Forces had transferred to Afghan authorities (ref b). The PM's spokesman charged that the opposition only wanted to "focus on events from 2006" even though the opposition MPs had been "unable to prove any wrongdoing by Canadian military, diplomats, or the Canadian Forces." In contrast, he underscored, the government intends to focus on the economy.

16. (U) A new Nanos poll reinforced the Conservatives' - and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's personal - clear lead over the opposition. Among decided voters, the Conservatives have 39.5%

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support, with the Liberals at 30.2% and the NDP at 18.7%. In terms of trustworthiness, PM Harper trumped the Liberals' Ignatieff 29.3% to 10.9%; on competence, PM Harper was at 35.3% versus Ignatieff's 13.3%; and, on vision, PM Harper's 30% to Ignatieff's 14.8%.

17. (SBU) Comment: The prorogation will likely provoke little public response beyond Ottawa and the grumblings of opposition MPs in their ridings (districts). The holiday recess is usually a quiet time in Canadian politics, and the February 2010 Winter Olympics will captivate the public far more than any Parliamentary hearings might have done. The Conservatives will lose momentum on approximately three dozen pieces of legislation, but they had already succeeded in passing key bills on the economy and unemployment insurance before the Christmas break began (ref c). Arguably, the Conservatives have gained very little by this prorogation, apart from avoiding close-up sniping from the opposition. However, there has been no particular political cost to them in taking this step, which the Conservatives will continue to portray as entirely routine (although it is not). The reality for the three opposition parties remains that they are not in a very good position to bring the government down and face the electorate yet, and so they would have been hamstrung in how far they could have gone - or still will be able to go in March - in actually opposing this government.
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